

Veterans' voices



Physical therapist Mike O'Brien, left, looks on as World War II veteran Ralph Butler enjoys a back massage in an Aqua Massage water therapy chair in the Charlotte Hall Veterans Home rehabilitation center Oct. 20.



One of three tastefully decorated dayrooms in the Charlotte Hall Veterans home is for use by residents and their guests.



Physical and occupational therapy equipment fills the rehabilitation center which is manned by a certified physical therapist and is open to all occupants of the Charlotte Hall Veterans Home.



Marine Corps emblems on a blanket and pillow in a typical private room in the Charlotte Hall nursing home unit give the room the occupant's personal touch.

Charlotte Hall veterans make themselves at home Maryland's only veterans home holds open house

Story and photos by
Yvonne Johnson
APG News

The Charlotte Hall Veterans Home welcomed veterans, spouses and family members to the first open house held in the facility's 25-year history Oct. 20.

Located on a picturesque campus in St. Mary's County, the home houses 500 veterans in its nursing home, assisted living, full-time care, Alzheimer's and hospice facilities.

"It is the only veterans home in the state of Maryland," said Laura Cosgrove, marketing director, adding that the facility accepts veterans and non-veteran spouses as residents.

The day included health care displays for visitors and tours of the facility. Hospice of St. Mary's, Heritage Health, and Regional Mobile Dental, as well as the Social Security Administration, and the Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs Cemetery and Memorials Programs set up displays and information booths.

Garry Brown, Prince Georges County veteran services officer, said he comes to Charlotte Hall to man the once a week VA clinic.

"We routinely answer inquiries about home loan guarantees, claims filing, VA cemeteries

and others," Brown said.

A veteran of the Navy, the Army National Guard, and the Baltimore County Police Department, Brown also serves the VA offices in Wheaton and Greenbelt.

Steven L. Wynn, Charlotte Hall administrator, and retired Army major, led tours of the facility throughout the day.

Visitors toured the dining rooms, medical clinics, barber shop, library, and private and semi-private rooms as well as therapeutic facilities that included whirlpool bath tubs and a fully-equipped physical therapy gym.

"We have a 95 percent male population," Wynn said as he guided visitors through two rooms reserved for females with an adjoining bathroom.

"But that will change as we move forward," he added noting that the building, which was constructed in 1985, will be undergoing renovations to accommodate its changing population.

Registered nurses and licensed practical nurses are on hand around the clock to tend to residents, Wynn noted.

"All must be certified to work around our patients and residents including the housekeeping staff," he said.

"Our residents are very happy here," he said. "We encourage everyone to bring personal items and think of this as their home."

"The 126-acre facility includes a walking track, outdoor water faucets and a pond stocked with perch and trout.

In addition, a bus transports residents to the mall, to shows, bowling alleys and to Patuxent Naval Air Station. Every wing is connected so there is no need to go out into the weather," he added.

"Independence is the key here," he said. "We encourage residents to do for themselves and we help those who can't."

Decorations with military themes can be found throughout the building.

Wynn said that local veterans organizations, scout troops and others are regular volunteers at the home.

"We welcome any group that wants to do something for our people, whether it's baking cookies or putting on a show," Wynn said. "Everyone here has given up something to serve our country. We try to give something back."

Ralph and Maxine Butler said they came to tour Charlotte Hall because they are considering applying for residency. A World War II

Navy veteran, Ralph said he was "very impressed" with what he saw.

"I've been through Bethesda but this is far more complete," he said. "It seems to have the family type atmosphere we're looking for."

Janina Serafin, weekend administrator in the hall's hospice unit, said that residents and family members are "well cared for."

"If I could live here I would," Serafin said. "Most people here realize how good they have it. We do what's necessary to ensure everyone is taken care of."

Charlotte Hall is a program of the Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs, operated under contract with the state of Maryland by Health Management Resources of Maryland, LLC. It has a nursing long-term care facility for Maryland veterans and eligible spouses who are unable to take care of themselves due to age or disability.

The home provides the support and services required for shelter, sustenance, medical care, and social services necessary to maintain the resident's medical condition and quality of life. When able to, the home endeavors to improve the residents' medical condition with a view to restoring independence and returning them to the community.

Awards

From page 2

His mother's persistence led her to discover the John Tracy Clinic in Los Angeles, a private, nonprofit educational center for the deaf founded by the wife of actor Spencer Tracy in 1942 and named for the couple's son, who was afflicted with childhood deafness. For his high-school education, his parents looked to various other institutions that accommodate students with disabilities.

"My parents tried different places, like one in the Pennsylvania School for the Deaf near Philadelphia and one in Frederick, Maryland, and one in D.C.," he said.

The Maryland School for the Deaf in Frederick seemed like a good choice, but he couldn't gain admission because he was a Pennsylvania resident at the time, so he opted for Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C., which has a Model Secondary School for the Deaf, known to be a leading institution for providing education and professional development for deaf and hard-of-hearing students.

"That's when I started learning sign language and meeting new friends," he recalled. "My grades went way up. Four out of 95 students earned a golden honorable, and I was one of the four. I was much happier because I wasn't missing any information."

At Gallaudet, he also met a deaf woman who would one day become his wife, and she also attended RIT in Rochester. They now have four children, none of whom are deaf.

The people at the EMI Test Facility have been very helpful to him and very patient with him, Martin said, calling it a great place to work.

"Mike Geiger [his EMI manager] and the other people are good to me," he said. "They know how to talk to me one-on-one. If there is a small meeting, I remind everybody to please talk one at a time because sometimes, when more than one person is talking at a time, I miss things." His fellow employees are always reminding themselves of that, he added.

In 2001, Martin lost all of the hearing that he had gained with a hearing aid, and he began to have dizzy spells. He was in bed for an entire week, and his doctor diagnosed Meniere's disease, a disorder of the inner ear associated with a change in the volume of fluid inside a portion of the inner ear called the labyrinth. Symptoms include dizziness, nausea, vomiting, unsteadiness, a sense of fullness in the ear, ringing in the ear (tinnitus),

headache, abdominal discomfort and hearing loss, which can increase if the disease progresses.

He tried a more powerful hearing aid to restore his hearing, but it didn't work, so he underwent a cochlear implant in his left ear about a year-and-a-half ago. The softest sound he had been able to hear with a regular hearing aid was about 35 decibels, he said. That's about the level of sound in a quiet office. The implant enables him to hear some sounds that are even softer.

"It takes time to get used to the new sounds," he said. "It's amazing. One time when I was in the living room watching TV, I turned everything off, and I could hear something ticking. It was a clock with regular AA batteries. When I was driving during rain, I could hear the tapping on the windshield. It was so sensitive. I'm not used to it."

In addition to getting used to softer sounds, he also has had to adjust to a 60-hour weekly work schedule, in 12-hour shifts alternating between day and night. It is a schedule necessitated by current military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, and it won't let up in the foreseeable future, he said.

Merit Employee of the Year

Graziano, who has been deaf since he was six months old, has undergone childhood experiences very similar to those of Martin. He attended the Saint Joseph Institute for the Deaf in St. Louis, Mo., from 1968 to 1974, before he was "mainstreamed" into the Pine Grove Middle School in Parkville, Md. He then transferred to Dulaney High School in Timonium, Md., to complete his last 3 years of school.

"I was selected as school yearbook photographer in my senior year," he recalled.

Graziano received no sign-language interpretation during his middle-school and high-school years, but he did have a tutor to help him. After being admitted to RIT in 1979, he received full support for tutoring, note-taking and sign-language interpreter services. He received an associate degree in data processing in 1982 and was transferred to the College of Applied Science and Technology. He received his bachelor's degree in computer systems from RIT in 1985.

When he came to APG almost two decades ago, the U.S. Army Materiel Command hired him as a computer programmer. The APG Directorate of Information Management selected him as a senior Web developer and consultant several years later. Among other current duties, he maintains and updates APG's Web site and the Web site of APG's Civilian Personnel Advisory Center.

In addition the Defense Department's Computer/Electronic Accommodation Program provides interpreters and assistive devices for him. Graziano said the DOIM has also made it easier to do his work, and his co-worker, Bernie Weed, is willing to work with him daily to assist in getting the mission accomplished.

Like Martin, he received a cochlear implant in his left ear four years ago at Johns Hopkins Hospital.

"I learned to hear new sounds and voices," Graziano said.

The cochlear implant helps him control his vocals, he added. Graziano finds the time to volunteer for community service at APG, where he serves on the APG Committee for the Disabled and as chairperson of its Education Committee. His committee activities include making sure the APG commander's "town hall meetings" have open captioning for the hearing impaired, and ensuring that all video products produced by the DOIM are also open-captioned.

"I normally reject any video without captions for the Web pages," he said. "I also make the effort to encourage county fire departments to include persons with disabilities in the statewide Disaster Exercise Drill."

He is convinced the federal government isn't doing enough to hire people with disabilities, and he cited a flyer that appeared on the Web site of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing in Government, one of the organizations that represent a coalition of qualified people with disabilities who seek government employment. According to the flyer's statistics, the federal workforce in general declined by some 7.33 percent between 1993 and 2002. The workforce with disabilities, according to the flyer Graziano cited, declined by 12.49 percent during the same time period.

"After almost 19 years, I believe that the federal government needs to hire more deaf and hard of hearing people," he said. "APG [does not have enough] full-time permanent sign-language interpreters to meet our needs."

But there are some signs of progress, he added. "The Federal Relay Service helps deaf and hard-of-hearing federal employees to service customers," he explained. "DOIM is willing to loan me to work with the Combined Federal Campaign's 2005 and 2006 programs."

When asked what advice he would give to people who have never experienced a disability themselves, he replied, "Take sign language classes. Don't be afraid to meet a person with a disability."